

(U) How Do You Stop the Epithet Epidemic in Your Office? Ask Zelda!

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Workplace Advice for SIGINTers

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(U) This week's column responds to a couple of questions that were submitted by readers regarding respect in the workplace - and in particular, the use of profanity. Those writing in were disturbed not only by foul language, but by political, racial, sexual and religious conversations that they felt should not be taking place in the office. Zelda's answer below is unclassified in its entirety.

Dear Ears Burning,

Similar to a more relaxed dress code over the years (see **previous column**), personal behavior at the Agency seems to have suffered from a lack of professionalism. Perhaps they are related. I believe that when people come to work dressed professionally, their mindset and vocabulary usually follow suit (no pun intended).

It can be very distressing to hear "intelligence professionals" speaking in ways that are neither intelligent *nor* professional. I know some military employees make the excuse that this type of language is acceptable at their other assignments (like on a ship), so they are in the habit of speaking this way and can't help it. Others "drop the F-bomb" and then say, "pardon my French." Both are equally inexcusable. These people are able to curb their cursing when they step into a church or their grandmother's house - they can certainly watch their language while at work.

**How to get them to comply**

You should try to solve this at the lowest level possible. That means talking to the offender(s) and letting them know that this behavior is disturbing to you. Ask them to stop. Keep in mind they might need to be reminded a few times, as it's tough to break bad habits. You might even agree on a "swear-word look" or gesture* to help remind co-workers who slip. Some workplaces have benefitted from instituting a "curse jar" where offenders have to deposit a dollar every time they say a forbidden word. Give the jar to charity when it gets full or use the contents to hold an ice cream social for the office.

If the offenders are unwilling to clean up their language, your next course would be to go to the workplace supervisor. It is his job to maintain a non-threatening work environment for all employees. Please know that there are Agency policies that support your request, and **the penalties** can be quite severe. Your management is in a position to enforce these.

Supervisors, curb this practice in your work center, even if none of your employees complain. Chances are someone is bothered by it but is just too shy to speak up, and you never know when the big boss or an important customer will drop by unannounced. Besides, it's just plain wrong! Become familiar with the regulations on the subject.** For example, did you know that the use of abusive, offensive, or unprofessional language, gestures or conduct is punishable by a letter of reprimand or a 30-day suspension ... *for the first offense*? And **removal from the Agency** for the third offense?! YIKES!!

Breaking the habit

If you are trying to curb your own foul mouth, one technique is to wear a rubber band around your wrist and snap it (ouch!) every time you catch yourself saying something you shouldn't. Think of acceptable words to substitute for the offending ones. You can have fun with this and use silly replacement words ("Excrement! I missed the deadline again!") to wean yourself off of them. But most of all, be aware of what you are saying and who can hear you. This also goes for those religious, political, racial, or sexual conversations at work. Even if you're sure your interlocutor doesn't mind, there might be someone over the partition who thinks the details of last night's "hook-up" are TMI...and the high school work study in your office did not come to the Agency to learn those new vocabulary words.

So save your potty mouth for the ball field and your political discussions for Facebook. The office is a place of business, and if you expect to be taken seriously you'll need to talk like a professional. Show some respect for yourself and your co-workers -- clean up your lingo and *shut the front door* where inappropriate conversations are concerned.

Zelda

* A tilt of the head accompanied by a raised eyebrow, covering your ears, or holding your nose to indicate "your language stinks" are just a few ways to convey your dissatisfaction with the language being used.

** **PMM Chapter 366** governs Personal Conduct

(U) Have you ever been in this situation? What is the man in the picture below thinking? Post your thoughts on this topic and/or a funny quip for the man's thought bubble on the **SIDtoday Blog**, and Zelda will announce the winner of the best caption in her next column.



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